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ABSTRACT

A counselor at a rural high school in New York reflects on her career and addresses issues facing rural school counselors. She chose a career in school counseling based on her interests in education, community involvement, and adolescents. As the only high school counselor for 280 students, she soon realized that rural youth faced many of the same problems as their urban peers: poverty, a lack of opportunities, and the need for new challenges. Her high visibility as a rural school counselor has enabled her to recognize many problems facing rural communities. Furthermore, the nature of her work allows great flexibility that puts her in an ideal position to initiate change. But, because of the lack of resources and isolation inherent in rural school systems, she has encountered obstacles in problem solving and initiating change. Despite this, there are numerous advantages to being a rural school counselor. For instance, it is easier to meet the needs of students when you know their history and family background. Rural school counselors must handle a variety of responsibilities, including balancing community expectations with community limitations. Rural school counselors must help students become aware of opportunities beyond their community while helping them recognize community strengths. Perhaps the most important responsibility of rural school counselors is to counter district limitations by developing and maximizing resources to meet the needs of students and their families. The most common problems addressed by rural school counselors include low academic achievement, issues of family functioning and cohesion, and the effects of poverty on student development. Rural school counselors may define and strengthen their role through self-evaluation, sharing effective strategies with other counselors, and forming networks to share resources. (LP)

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RURAL SCHOOL COUNSELING: TURNING OBSTACLES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

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Rural School Counseling: Turning Obstacles Into Opportunities

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My decision to become a school counselor was a relative epiphany, born of a culmination of efforts to find a career that would satisfy my interests in education, community involvement, and adolescents. Although all school counselors have arrived at this career by different avenues, we have in common a desire to provide a positive direction to the development of school-aged children. Where we differ, however, is the size and type of community in which we carry out this task.

Before I got my job, I gave little thought to how demographics would affect the very nuances of a school counseling position. Now, I am the only senior high school counselor for 280 students in a farming community of New York's Southern Tier. It certainly is not the setting in which I imagined myself. Because I was raised in a suburb of New York City, I pictured myself working with the youth we see frequently in the news: those who are urban, underprivileged, lacking opportunities, and needing new challenges. What I discovered is that, without the "urban," all of those descriptors apply to students in rural communities as well. But unlike those of urban communities, the needs of rural communities and the subsequent responsibilities of school counselors were underreported. In reality, the disparities of counseling in an urban or rural school rest less in the types of challenges that face our students and more in the manner in which we can address those challenges as their counselors.

School counselors are not without peers or opportunities. Although each of our experiences is unique, we can take similar steps to maximize the reward of our common position. First, it is important to re-examine what brought us to the field of counseling and how we define our experiences and responsibilities. Second, it is important to categorize how we perceive our communities' expectations of us and reactions to us. Third, we must evaluate the problems of counseling in a rural school. And finally, each of us would benefit from expressing our thoughts on the direction of rural school counseling and how the position can be fortified.

Initial Experiences With a Rural School

Since my initiation into rural schools, I have changed some very fundamental assumptions that I made about school counseling. I assumed that I would have to struggle to make my role clear within the school. I assumed that I would have to struggle to make myself visible within the

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school. And most important, I assumed that I would have to struggle to evaluate the needs of the community's students. What I learned is that without the career counselors, testing supervisors, college counselors, and even assistant principals of larger school districts, the role of the rural school counselor seems lucid enough: we do a little bit of everything. And making ourselves visible? It is not difficult when each rural district employs only a handful of counselors. But perhaps most germane to the daily functioning of rural school counselors is that our close contact with the community ensures that we remain aware of its needs.

My pleasure at immediately understanding the rural community's problems, challenges, and expectations was soon clouded by the formidable lack of resources and frequently archaic systems inherent in rural schools. This paradox of knowing the community's problems but having underdeveloped resources to address its issues, has since become my paradigm of rural school counseling. We simultaneously face opportunities and obstacles.

The degree and type of archaic resources vary widely between school systems. When I began, one visible deficit in my own district was its lack of computerized guidance tools. We lacked not only one of the popular and expensive, interactive guidance systems, but also scheduling and report card instruments. Before my arrival, the master schedule was done by hand and the secretary typed all junior and senior high schedules. Fortunately, we have acquired both a student-friendly and schedule-creating computer, but grades are still written on report cards, and I hand calculate honor role averages and senior ranks. The disadvantage of this antiquated system is obvious: I am not available for students' counseling needs while I am plugging 22 grades into a calculator to determine a senior's average. These deficiencies tell of a greater implication for rural schools and their counseling programs. As Cole (1991) recognized in his examinations of rural school short comings, "Schools that can afford lots of [computers] . . . will do so, and the gap between the haves and have-nots will widen." Rural students ultimately are the have-nots when resources are unattainable in their district's counseling program.

Many outdated models of operation in rural guidance offices stem from a myth that change is unwanted all across rural America. For example, all rural school counselors are undoubtedly aware of one potential nemesis: the-way-it's-always-been-done syndrome. This phrase is frequently heard in response to such questions as, "Why don't we offer any electives in the English and history departments?" But change is not shunned; it simply is slow and requires initiative. Unlike schools in urban areas that sometimes have change thrust upon them, rural schools and their consequent isolation necessitate that change be brought to them.

The rural school counselor is in an ideal position to initiate change. The autonomy inherent in our position because we are frequently one- or two-person operations gives us the freedom to explore our ideas without much opposition. Students, parents, and faculty alike have been surprisingly open to changes in homogeneous tracking systems, additional course offerings, group counseling activities, and classroom-based career projects. But here, again, the paradox

of rural counseling appears. Faced with openness and flexibility, we lack resources and are often isolated from the changes taking place in other districts.

Despite the frustration this conflict creates, I sometimes get a reminder of the strengths of the rural school counselor from the world outside our rural community. Recently, a new student enrolled in our district from a large, urban school on Long Island. On the telephone, his counselor informed me that he had a special education classification and was scheduled only for self-contained classes. Thinking aloud, I said, "Oh, we're such a small school, we don't have self-contained classes on campus." But when I asked his specific classification, she responded, "We're such a big school that I'm not privy to that information. You'll have to call our special education department." At these times, our geographical and emotional proximity outweighs any lack of opportunities. Of course, in rural schools, we are privy to more than just CSE classifications. We learn the history of each student, which frequently includes what kind of quarterback his or her father was when he was at the same high school. Invaluable information lies within these histories when they are properly deciphered. And, we learn to use this pool of information to work within the existing system to its benefit.

I cannot say what draws counselors in larger schools together. But rural school counselors seem to find a bond in the common knowledge that we are involved in a little bit of everything and know a little bit about everyone. At a recent conference for rural school counselors, the two most frequently asked questions were: How many students are in your district? And, are you the only counselor? From our unique experiences, we know the irony of counseling in a rural school. While the community is isolated geographically, school counselors are not isolated at all. Rather, we are the locus for anything that even remotely relates to counseling. This irony creates the foundation for realizing the opportunities inherent in the obstacles that we face.

Responsibilities of Rural School Counselors

All school counselors participate in counselor education programs and practicums that prepare us, more or less, for the general tasks we face in a school setting. However, the responsibilities of *rural* school counselors differ from those of their suburban and urban counterparts on two significant levels: the delegation of responsibility and nature of responsibility to the school's community.

When I completed my practicum in an Upstate New York "city" high school, I worked with three counselors who each had a portion of the school's 800 students and were solely responsible for certain tasks. For example, one counselor handled college applications and senior transition, another organized standardized testing and vocational school registration, and the third worked with the district's special education population. Larger systems, of course, further segment both authority and control of counseling tasks.

Today, I am the only high-school-level counselor in my school system. Although I share many general guidance-related tasks with the district's elementary school counselor, all high-school-specific responsibilities are entirely mine. Obviously, all rural

schools are subject to restrictions in counselling personnel. Because of our skill in handling varied responsibilities, we have been referred to as "jugglers" (Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). At any moment, we may be called on to act as testing administrator, truant officer, college admissions counselor, registrar, employee assistance counselor, guidance computer specialist, crisis counselor, special education facilitator, financial aid specialist, drop-out preventer, and even locker assigner.

This seemingly overwhelming array of tasks is somehow manageable in the rural setting. Not only are our numbers small, but we *know* our students and their families. In a crisis, we spend less time trying to learn the players. A home visit, though not necessarily pleasant, will probably be in a neighborhood with which we are familiar and with parents we have met. Annual scheduling is made easier by an awareness of each student's strengths and weaknesses.

Beyond our tangible job responsibilities, rural school counselors have a responsibility to the community in which we work. In some aspects, this responsibility is not much different than it would be in an urban community. As school counselors, we try to prepare students—socially, academically, and vocationally—for their lives beyond high school. And, of course, all school counselors need to be aware of the community's expectations and limitations for its graduates.

In rural districts, school counselors must make students (many of whom have rarely left the county) aware of the possibilities beyond their community while helping them recognize the strengths within their community. Many rural students see a one-way road out of town. As one counselor noted, students in rural schools simultaneously seek a "passport" out of their county and yet are wary of leaving (Holehouse, 1991). In my district, I either see students who believe they will never leave, or others who want to leave and never return. It is our responsibility to remove this "either/or" mindset and create more flexible options. Many parents and community members are wary of efforts to encourage students to go to college, fearing that the community will lose its younger generations. We have a responsibility, then, to the community to develop students' feelings of pride rather than alienation toward their town.

In keeping with the paradox that defines rural school counseling, our most important responsibility is to balance the district's limitations with the strengths inherent in the counselor's role. For example, a glaring deficiency in many rural schools is the low rate of college attendance among students. While we cannot compensate for all of the opportunities that are lacking—such as Advanced Placement courses, historical family college attendance, and exposure to culture outside of the community—we can use our flexibility, autonomy, and in-depth knowledge of students to provide high-school-to-college transition programs and one-on-one college coaching to fit individual student needs. Using what resources we have, we can maximize our students' opportunities, even if we cannot alter their obstacles.

Expectations for Us

Once again, the combination of a rural school counselor's visibility within the community combined with the community's isolation defines the parameters of the

expectations of us. Rural school counselors are like general practitioners; we cannot afford to specialize. In terms of both student numbers and funding, we cannot afford many of the focused programs of larger schools (Rose-Gold, 1991). Furthermore, rural communities expect us to be versed in everything. This expectation frequently develops because county social service agencies and "local" community colleges are miles away and particularly inaccessible to those without transportation. Like counselors in other setting, we rely on our ability to make referrals, but this is a tenuous resource when we know that our students and their families have little access to the referred agencies. We are expected to be the bridge between families and the resources beyond their geographical reach.

Not only are we expected to fill the gaps in accessible services, but we are expected to be accessible ourselves. This expectation is one of our best public relations tools. Through our inherent visibility, we can be accessible while boosting confidence in our intentions to help the community as a whole. For example, we can hold an impromptu parent conference at a local grocery store. By delivering financial aid forms to a parent working in a local bank, we can increase confidence in our program. As the most accessible service provider, we frequently are called on to assist students after they have graduated. Because we may be the only source for information on jobs, colleges, registration procedures, and financial aid, it is imperative that we continue to offer guidance to people outside our caseload.

Students' expectations of us tend to vary from student to student, and, as in any counseling setting, their attitude toward us depends largely on how we portray ourselves. Students in rural schools bring us a wonderful advantage in establishing our role. Because they have grown up in an atmosphere of openness, where, for better or worse, much of a family's history is public knowledge, rural students are less wary of opening themselves up to a counselor. We have fewer defenses to fight. Students spend less time telling us their history and more time telling us where they are now.

However, this familiarity presents us with two obstacles. As in any close-knit community, students in rural areas sometimes carry seemingly indelible "labels" to which they assume we will subscribe. They believe that we will have the same expectations for them, high or low, that the rest of the community has. This obstacle also appears when working with a group of students who may have a hard time seeing beyond the labels they know each student carries. Confidentiality is another difficult issue when counseling a group of students. Because many personal issues seem to be public knowledge, an atmosphere of confidentiality can be difficult to instill and requires a greater emphasis when initiating a group.

Problems Addressed by Rural School Counselors

Almost weekly, the news tells stories of violence and race relations in urban and suburban schools. It is much easier to find a journal article addressing research or applications for problems in urban schools. Occasionally, an instance of violence in a rural school makes headlines, but many of

the issues we face daily remain relatively unspoken. An analysis of research on rural schools shows that "a preoccupation with suburban and particularly urban schools has long diverted our attention from academic life in rural America" (McNergney & Haberman, 1988). This disparity in attention is disconcerting because more than half of America's schools are rural, and logic alone should tell us that rural students face the same family, social, academic, and emotional problems that youth all over the country are facing. Rural schools do not lack problems; they lack public voice and visibility.

People seem genuinely surprised when I discuss some of the issues facing rural students and, consequently, their counselors. It seems that the bucolic landscape of a rural town is equated with interpersonal tranquility, just as the chaos of a city is assumed to correspond with interpersonal confusion. Those of us who see rural students every day know that they are faced with deteriorating family structures, boredom, adolescent pregnancy, drug use and abuse, incest, sexism, depression, eating disorders, child abuse, transience, and so on. We struggle with solutions to these issues just as all school counselors do. To address every problem we come across in rural school counseling offices seems an insurmountable task. However, a few interrelated issues warrant close consideration because they are pervasive and directly affect so many other issues our students face.

Low academic achievement is one of the most glaring problems confronting students, educators, and counselors in rural schools. We see the effects of absent aspirations every day, such as failing grades and college attendance rates much lower than the national average of 62 percent (U.S. Department of Labor, 1992). The vast number of factors that affect this issue complicates remediation, and sometimes we are tempted to get caught up in causality. For example, we ask ourselves questions such as, "Does drug use determine low achievement or does low achievement lead to drugs?" Naturally, in rural schools as in any school, no easy answers present themselves.

Low student achievement in rural areas can be traced to several factors. We frequently see students who are not encouraged at home or in the community to strive for excellence in school. We hear parents tell us that "just passing" is good enough. Rural communities are not trying to set low standards for their students. However, parents and, therefore, their children often envision no rewards for doing more than "getting by." They see too few opportunities and too many failed dreams. As a result, rural students lack both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Thus, the onus is on us not only to teach students their outer limits of achievements, but also to show them the rewards. Tangible rewards, such as increased opportunities, can be demonstrated by bringing in successful and even "mediocre" past graduates. Emotional rewards, such as increased self-worth and empowerment, may need to be taught through small groups that stress personal means of motivation and reward.

Some problems facing our students can be compared more directly to problems facing school-aged children throughout the country. The issue of family functioning and cohesion confronts all students and, therefore, all school personnel. Separation

and divorce are prevalent in rural schools and frequently account for the transience we see in a student's record. Obviously, we face a considerable challenge when a student is in and out of our district every six months to live first with mom and then with dad. These students have unpredictable lifestyles. Even nuclear families can place the burden of control or a parent's emotional problems on a child. It is difficult to help an adolescent to be a student when he or she is forced to be a parent for the rest of the family's children. Such a family is naturally inattentive to the student's emotional and academic needs, compounding our challenges as that student's counselor. Again, in these situations, counselors can take advantage of their accessibility to a rural community. We can mobilize and reward parents through workshops, parent nights, and newsletters. Through these efforts, we hope for parents first to see us as a resource and second to see themselves as responsible for their children's development.

In addition to their geographic isolation, rural communities seem to have a unique kind of poverty. While each rural district faces a different level of poverty, it nonetheless threatens every students' development. On the individual level, we counsel students who demonstrate poverty's insidious effects. One female student in our high school developed anorexia, in part, from a fear that her family's food was insufficient for all of them. The literature on general developmental issues rarely addresses these effects of poverty in rural areas. As a result, rural school counselors need to develop their own awareness.

Perhaps more problematic is the effect that poverty has on students' esteem—for their school and for themselves. My students estimated the district's poverty to be much worse than it is. This perspective belies their view that their school is somehow inherently of less value than a district where poverty is not so visible. Their perceptions go with them when they leave the district and affect how they compare themselves and their academic preparation to others'. Both real and imagined poverty damage the students chances by lowering expectations and self-esteem and creating personal immobility. Rural school counselors seek to minimize this immobility as it takes the form of historical disadvantage, cycles of welfare dependence, and lack of self-respect. We can combat poverty in many ways, such as narrowing the gap of disadvantage or increasing awareness about college programs and processes. The more tools we give our students, the less disadvantaged they will be when they leave us.

The Future of Rural School Counseling

School counselors in all settings are being asked increasingly to define and account for what is still a rather mercurial position. In rural schools, counselors cannot afford to allow themselves to be isolated during this process. Despite geographical distance, our commonalities afford us an excellent foundation to strengthen the role of the rural school counselor. At the very least, we owe to ourselves and our districts a self-examination that includes whether we are meeting our own standards and expectations. We can begin by asking ourselves what goals we had set when we began as counselors and how we have modified, reevaluated, or accomplished them in the context of a rural school.

Another way to fortify our role is to share our strategies and be willing to listen to what has worked for others. It is a misperception to believe that in order to share an idea it must be unique or original. Communication also can take a broader but equally valuable form. Telling other rural counselors what practices work in our own school or, perhaps, describing what alterations we have made to old practices provides consistency and strength to the role of the rural school counselor. Conversely, we must avoid negating new approaches with the belief that "that'll never work in our district." If we set an example of risk-taking to initiate change, those around us are likely to follow (Worzbyt & Zook, 1992). Although the risks may be calculated, we should take them both to challenge the belief that rural schools avoid change and to provide the most conducive developmental atmosphere for our students.

A third means of solidifying our role is even more concrete: to form systematic networks with other rural school counselors both in and out of our regions. Through networks, many of which are already established, we can share our ideas for rural school counseling and we can support and supervise one another. Without concerted effort, our isolation can prevent the systematic exchange of professional ideas and feedback. Ideally, we should work toward sharing resources, both personnel and materials. For example, one district could trade time on an interactive computer system for another district's organized career presentation. The idea of sharing programs is not new to rural schools and has been applied to whole grade levels in schools in some states (Pipho, 1987). Certainly, such an approach could be extended to counseling-related programs. Through rural counseling networks, we can augment our already strong ability to conduct needs assessment and we can begin to dissolve the obstacle of our lacking resources.

We don't need to wait for organized networks, complicated research, or increased material resources to begin to transform the obstacles to our school counseling programs into opportunities. We need only become more cognizant of the ways that we can assess our students' strengths and weakness. We can call a few parents and personally invite them to our next college information evening. Or we can suggest that a few students who are struggling socially have lunch with us. We can make a positive remark to a student that contradicts the label he or she carries. Because rural school counselors have access to this type of information and to this type of contact, we can begin immediately to address our isolation and lack of resources through centrality and awareness.

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